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# THE ROUND TABLE

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## AN EXPERIMENT IN CO-OPERATION

An attempt has recently been made in a normal school to meet the constant complaint that power gained in literary composition does not transfer to theme work in subjects other than English. Use was made of the fact that the task of effecting such transfer is a triangular affair, the apexes being the English instructor, the instructors in other subjects, and the students themselves. In this case, the instructors in psychology, mathematics, art, and industrial arts assigned subjects and directed the gathering of material; the English instructor took matters of technique as his natural task; and all united in trying to impress the students with the purpose of the plan and with the importance of their own personal endeavor.

The special aim of the English instructor at this particular time was to let his students have practice in the gathering and organizing of material from the literature of the subjects then being studied, and to impress them with the moral obligation of acknowledging the sources of their information. Being wise from former experience, or, at least, thinking himself so, he was careful to instruct his classes that the themes must, after all, be more than material gathered from books and periodicals; there must also be the original touch that would come from the expression of personal views and of such personal experience as might come within the range of the subjects.

After the themes had been read by the instructor concerned, a meeting was called to consider results. The verdict rendered was not such as to cause the English instructor any undue self-glorification. While his fellow-teachers admitted that the technique of the themes was somewhat better than usual, that the plan had been worth while, and that it was worthy of further experimentation, it was observed, on the other hand, that many of the themes had been nothing more than compilations, that some showed the diverse styles of the authors whose works had been consulted, and that in some cases the expression was strained and artificial. There were several exceptions to these disappointments. One student, especially, wrote in a style that was

strictly original and highly effective. She seemed to write with the subconscious feeling that rhetoric is the science of communicating thought, while most of the others seemed to consider it the science of carrying out the orders of an English instructor.

While much of the artificiality and the slavish adherence to notes was doubtless due to the facts that the technique of composition had not yet become a matter of habit, and that using material from assigned sources was more or less a new thing, most of the fault lay in three blunders of the English instructor: he gave no preliminary practice in the exposition of subjects related to the studies from which the themes were chosen, he did not insist upon the subject-matter being thoroughly digested and the notes thrown aside before the themes were written, and he did not attempt to put his students in the attitude of imparting information to persons who were ignorant and might want to know. These blunders were especially bad because the instructor thought he knew better than to fall into them. It seems that the judgment of his associates was necessary to awaken him to a consciousness of his ability to do a thing the wrong way.

On the whole, the experience speaks eloquently for co-operation between teachers of English and those who teach other subjects. We put our young men and women in artificial situations when we assign themes wholly from literature, or with literary production as the only motive; for few of them will ever be critics, or novelists, or essayists, or poets—except in the English classes. On the other hand, we place them in a perfectly natural situation when we assign themes from the subjects they are studying; for they have daily need of ability to express themselves in these subjects, and the ability is too often lacking. The attainment of the best results in this sort of theme work involves consultation with and criticism from teachers of subjects other than English. Such co-operation tends to intensify the student's feeling of responsibility, it provides for timely assignment of themes, and it gives opportunity for a more accurate judgment of results than the English teacher can reach unaided. He can therefore yield to such practical work much of the time devoted to composition whose motive is purely aesthetic.

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